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DOI:

[10.1177/0170840616685366](https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840616685366)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

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Citation for published version (APA):

Flyverbom, M., & Reinecke, J. (2017). The Spectacle and Organization Studies. *Organization Studies*, 38(11), 1625-1643 . <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840616685366>

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Original citation:

Flyverbom, M. and Reinecke, Juliane. (2017) The spectacle and organisation studies.
Organization Studies.

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This had been posted ahead of publication.

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<https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840616685366>

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Spectacles and Organization

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Forthcoming in Organization Studies (Accepted November 2016)

Abstract

The aim of this essay is to revisit Guy Debord's critical theory of the spectacle as formulated 50 years ago in the 'Society of the Spectacle' in light of the contemporary production of spectacles. Debord's arguments about appearance, visibility and celebrity are echoed in the way organizations increasingly focus on their brand, image, impression, and reputation. Yet, the role of spectacles in organizational life has remained under-researched in organization studies. As the boundaries between fact and fiction, reality and representation, substance and appearance become increasingly blurred, questions about the production and effects of spectacles seem more pertinent than ever. Are representations faithful mirrors of reality, or attempts to conceal reality? Do they replace reality, or bring new realities into being? By articulating three possible understandings of the spectacle, as fetishism, hyper-reality or performativity, this essay invites organization scholars to examine the organization of the real and the making of organizations through processes of spectacular representation including discursive practices, visual images and theatrical performances.

Keywords

situationist movement, Debord, Marxism, commodity fetishism, visibilities, image, performativity, representation, hyper-reality

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Introduction

'In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation' (Debord, 1992/1967, §1)¹

The idea of organization as spectacle is perhaps best illustrated in how the New York Stock Exchange presents itself at the centre of capitalist activity. Every morning on a Wall Street trading day, a celebrity rings the historic bell at 9:30am EST as if to effect the start of trading. While corporate executives and media congregate on what is advertised as 'the biggest stage in history' (NYSE, 2016), the trading floor itself remains empty. Meanwhile, the first high-frequency orders are likely executed before the bell's echo has gone. Despite being fully electronic, the opening of America's stock exchange is a staged, highly mediatized event that presents a tangible rendition of financial capitalism. Of course, many spectators already suspect that the 'real' trading activity is no longer executed on the floor, but via inaccessible, fortified, high-security data centres outside the city. Why would we need the daily performance of opening an empty trading floor? Why not just dismantle the building and admit that much of trading is now performed by the 'invisible hand' of algorithms? Why keep up the appearance of a 'real' physical reference point? Is it pure nostalgia? Or a shrewd attempt to direct our attention away from the ugliness of capitalism, hiding the work of the algorithms of high-frequency traders, the 'self-propelling metaphysical dance of capital that runs the show' (Žizek, 2008, p. 11)? And still, we seem surprised about the realities that are exposed when the spectacle breaks down – even though we kind of knew it all along. Consider powerful traders in the midst of the Financial Crisis, whose meticulously assembled stock of

¹ Paraphrased from Karl Marx's *Das Capital* (1930/1867): 'The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails presents itself as an immense accumulation of commodities.'

sophisticated 'AAA'-rated collateral debt positions tumbled into sheer nothingness – leaving behind an empty shell of ratings and themselves presiding over the circulation of nothing.

Creating dramatized representations of a reality, creating spectacles, is at the heart of what most organizations do and what most organizing is about: Creating a brand. Marketing a product. Doing leadership. Creating forecasts and visions in strategy. Narrating a corporate sustainability report. Even publishing a financial account. Submitting a tax return. One could argue that corporations themselves are modern incarnations of the Spectacle: A form that is narrated into being through PR and branding, and biography which is curated by the emerging profession of the corporate storyteller. Do representations mirror the world faithfully? Do they conceal the world under a shining veneer? Or do they narrate into being a series of facades in absence of any underlying reality, or create new realities altogether? This essay invites organization scholars to reinvigorate conceptualizations of the spectacle and to interrogate the organizational workings of spectacles.

As the boundaries between fact and fiction, reality and representation, substance and appearance become increasingly blurred, we suggest revisiting and extending Guy Debord's thesis of the 'Society of the Spectacle' which he declared 50 years ago. Debord (1992/1967) observed how modern conditions of consumption have turned life into 'an immense accumulation of spectacles' through media, news, propaganda, advertising, and entertainment. Following Debord, the notion of the spectacle invites a reflection on the relationship between the real and representation, substance and appearance. Just as in Rene Magritte's famous surrealist painting of 1928 depicting a pipe with the words written below 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' ('This is not a pipe'), Debord reminds us that representation is surreal, not the real thing. It requires critical analysis since access to reality is often mediated by spectacles.

Spectacle is also a misleading term. It can lead one to think that it is about spectacular representation in a moment of show or mis-en-scene, or a visual concept. But for Debord, the post-Marxist, the spectacle is first and foremost representation that has become autonomous, separated from its underlying reality, and productive of a false consciousness that masks brute reality through dream-like imagery. By stressing that the 'spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images,' Debord reworks Marx' notion of commodity fetishism. Social relations have transformed into a series of commodity exchanges, but commodification is concealed and glossed over by image-spectacles which pacify the masses and elicit passive acceptance.

The developments that Debord saw manifested in the rise of mass media and consumer society have arguably intensified via information technologies, social media, big data and virtual realities as new, powerful mediators between reality and its appearance. While Marx (1969/1848) declared long ago that 'All that is solid melts into air,' spectacles now promise fantastic realities 'out there' in all kinds of organizational settings, but may be built on a lot less or nothing at all – spectacular reports, massive valuations, fantastic marketing claims or 'AAA' ratings of subprime bonds. They may build up a glorified version of a reality that has never been there. As the leak of Ashley Madison's costumer base revealed, most cheaters on the extramarital affair website had been communicating with automated web robots rather than actual women whose seductive images lured them in. Other spectacles disguise what is too ugly to reveal: Sweatshop labour in global supply chains. The carbon footprint of cloud computing. The manifestations of the spectacle are thus manifold. They range from the theatrical and fantastic to the mundane and banal: Ritual. Circus. Carnival. Show. Performance. News. But also accounts. Reports. Certificates. Labels. They can be a tool of asserted transparency and dispassionate information disclosure, or one of playful

imagery. Organizing increasingly resides in the production of 'spectacular' reality claims which outplay the material-physical presence of material objects, formal structures or relationships. Organizations may seem more 'real' if they have a website and recognizable brand rather than a physical building and employees.

While Debord provides a pertinent diagnosis of how the spectacle has colonized society, we open up the concept to further conceptual and analytical exploration of what it means when organizations create certain representations of reality, or spectacles. The intersection between representation and the 'real' highlights critical questions about organizing (Alvesson, 1990): How do organizations produce spectacles to organize and order the real? How does the 'proliferation of techniques of picturing, showing, reproducing, and displaying the actual, the artificial, and the fantastic' (Shapiro, 2003, p. 1-2) shape the (everyday as well as extraordinary) organization of the real? And how does the representation of social and organizational relations become a productive activity in itself?

The Situationist International and Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle

The notion of the spectacle is typically associated with the work of the French Marxist theorist Guy Debord. Debord was the most prominent theorist of the Situationist International, a small yet influential group of revolutionary avant-garde artists and intellectuals from 1957-1973 influenced by Dada, Surrealism and Lettrism. Initially an art movement, the situationists turned towards capitalist critique. Neither communists nor anarchists, they saw their political project as a continuation of Marx's critique of capitalism, and commodity fetishism in particular.

As a major reformulation of Marxist thinking, the spectacle is the key concept of situationist analysis. The most elaborate expositions of situationist thinking were Guy Debord's 'The Society of

the Spectacle' and Raoul Vaneigem's 'The Revolution of Everyday Life' in 1967. Debord (1992/1967, p. 10) later wrote that his 'book should be read bearing in mind that it was written with the deliberate intention of doing harm to spectacular society.' Indeed, both texts were highly influential in France during the 1968 student rebellion. According to the situationists, spectacular capitalism produces a certain *weltanschauung* that determines what we see in the world:

'The spectacle cannot be understood either as a deliberate distortion of the visual world or as a product of the technology of the mass dissemination of images. It is far better viewed as a weltanschauung that has been actualized, translated into the material realm – a world view transformed into an objective force.' (Debord, 1992/1967, §5)

Reality as we perceive it is 'ideology materialized' (Gilman-Opalsky, 2011, p. 70). Appearances are never neutral. Fabricated by dominant interests, they are the vehicle for particular interpretations of reality. Spectacles 'reflect the ideological position of those who have architected society for their own interest' (Gilman-Opalsky, 2011, p. 73). Official culture is a 'rigged game.' By creating obfuscation and 'encouraging passivity and consumerism' (Markovitz, 2011, p. 4), spectacular capitalism contributes to the depoliticization of the public sphere; 'the purpose of spectacle is to redirect citizens' attention from structural inequalities to spectacular events designed to subdue social criticism' (Kersten & Abbott, 2012, p. 324). Thus, the situationists sought to uncover how the production of spectacles reinforces oppressive social structures and power relations while turning citizens into passive spectator-consumers.

Any new form of revolutionary contestation had to overcome the perceived failure of 'the old attempts at liberation' (Debord, 1963) and work against 'recuperation'; the core mechanism by which capitalism sanitizes and domesticates the disruptive power of subversive ideas. Such is

the *New Spirit of Capitalism* (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005): Radical critique gets safely absorbed, is recuperated and reformulated within the ethos that sustains capitalism as the dominant ideology. For instance, Dadaist art, which was supposed to provoke political action, was turned into a commodity, to be consumed by gallery viewers and sold on art auctions.

Revolution does not, as Marx hoped, reside in the contradictions and instabilities or capitalism itself. Thus, situationists hoped to reinvent everyday life here and now by creating 'situations that open up a space for criticism and collective action.' Such situations would set the stage for sustained contestation...which 'begins beyond the ruins of the modern spectacle,' as Debord wrote in a foundational text in 1957. The concept of situation took inspiration from French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre who wrote in 1943 'that there is freedom only in a situation, and there is a situation only through freedom.' The idea is to experimentally create or to seize situations that foster critique and rebellion and 'present a revolutionary alternative to the ruling culture' (Debord, 1957). A core counter-technique to recuperation is 'détournement' (Gilman-Opalsky, 2011). Détournements devise creative alterations of existing images, events or statement so as to turn 'expressions of the capitalist system and its media culture against itself' (Holt & Cameron, 2010, p. 252). The idea is to reroute images and events and jolt people out of their taken-for-granted ways of seeing reality, thereby making space for a critique that undermines dominant ideology. While the Situationist International dissolved in 1972, the example of *AdBusters* illustrates how its ideas have prevailed and predate the terrain of contemporary artistic activism. The Canadian culture-jamming magazine turns slogans and images in advertisements against the advertisers and their ideological intent. In July 2011, *AdBusters'* poetic and provocative poster depicting a ballerina dancing gracefully on top of the Wall Street bull with the hashtag '#OccupyWallStreet September 17th. Bring tent.' contributed if not launched Occupy Wall Street.

Hence, his contrast between capitalism's 'essence' – its underlying determinants – and its 'appearance.' The way that it appears to us with 'phantom-like objectivity' – is key to understanding capitalism. Marx thus talks of the 'enigma' or 'mystery' of the commodity and commodity fetishism, which refers to the reversal of 'material relations between persons and social relations between things' (Marx, 1930/1867, p. 46). Commodity fetishism describes the split that has come about between real social activity and its representation, the commodity form.

By extending Marx's view of commodity fetishism, Debord's diagnosis is that the scope of capitalism – and alienation – has spread from production to consumption and mass media: Modern capitalist society is a society of 'spectacular' commodity consumption: 'alienated consumption becomes for the masses a duty supplementary to alienated production' (Debord, 1992/1967, §42). Capitalist exploitation not only builds on extracting surplus value from the worker, but also from the consumer. It does so by creating pseudo-needs. The 'spectacular' commodity form enters into the private realm of the worker. Debord thus argues, that 'the spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life.' Authentic social life has been replaced with its representation: 'All that was once directly lived has become mere representation' (Debord, 1992/1967, §1). The spectacle is an extreme form of commodity fetishism, 'a social relationship between people mediated by [commodified] images.' These mediations provide an illusionary representation of reality. This subsumes life to mere image, but in a way that 'mere images become real beings' (§18). Appearance is preferred over reality, the sign over the signifier:

'[The present age] prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence... illusion only is sacred, truth profane... truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.' (Feuerbach, Preface to the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity*, quoted in Debord, 1992/1967)

While the dialogue may not have always been a direct one, by theorizing the spectacle as capitalism's instrument for distracting and pacifying the consuming masses, Debord implicitly moves the capitalist organization into the centre of spectacle production. Debord's arguments about appearance, visibility and celebrity are echoed in the way organizations increasingly focus on their brands, images, impressions, and reputation. Vice versa, the interest in organizational symbolism, corporate identity, images, visions, storytelling, branding and reputation reflects organizational scholars' recognition of the significance of image and image production by organizations and in managerial work (Alvesson, 1990; 2013). Boje and colleagues (2004, p. 752, emphasis original) go one step further when they argue that 'spectacle theatrics' is '*the* work of contemporary organizations'.

Organizational scholars are uniquely placed to examine the organizational production of such pacifying and desire-inducing spectacles. Alvesson (1990) talks about the 'imaginary character' of the modern organization which has moved from 'substance' to one whose trademark is 'image'. As organizations become 'image-sensitive', what Pfeffer (1981) termed 'symbolic action' becomes a central organizational activity. Organizations invest an increasing amount of time, resources and skills into activities whose primary and explicit targets are the impressions of the audiences the company wants to affect (Alvesson, 1990), including window-dressing, storytelling and impression management.

While symbolic action pervades many aspects of managerial work, branding and accounting are two examples that poignantly illustrate the role of spectacles in organizations. First, branding creates spectacles of 'persuasion, circling around promotion, desire, and expectations' (Alvesson, 2013, p. 218). Brand-name manufacturers, who often do little more than directing a global production network, rely on spectacular branding and consumer-facing retail appearance in order

to establish the symbolic value of products and brands. The emphasis on brand value reflects Debord's observation that the 'spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive' so that we even begin to value appearance in itself: 'that which appears is good, that which is good appears' (Debord, 1992/1967, §12). If something appears, is visible and talked about, the assumption is that it must be good or important. At some point, we conflate visibility with value. One just has to look at celebrity culture where fame 'has acquired infinitely more importance than the value of anything one might actually be capable of doing' (Debord, 1988, p. iv). Organizations channel ever greater resources into branding, advertising, and the strategic circulation of staged narratives to help solidify an organization's 'celebrity status' (Rindova, Pollock, & Hayward, 2006, p. 50). To establish the brand value that drives Apple's profit-margins, the technology company unveils new products with a dramatized, public spectacle, eagerly awaited and rumoured about by tech experts, journalists and consumers months in advance. 'Designed in California. Assembled in China' illustrates how far more effort is expended on the spectacle of the brand than material production, which is outsourced to low-cost sweatshop labourers in far-away factories.

Second, corporate accounts, disclosures and reports have been associated with spectacle production (Boje et al., 2004; MacIntosh, Shearer, Thornton, & Welker, 2000; Uddin, Gumb, & Kasumba, 2011). Accounting scholars have criticized the ideal of transparency as consistent with a functionalist and positivist paradigm, according to which corporate reality can be faithfully represented through performance metrics of an organization (Boiral, 2013). Instead, they have studied how corporate spectacles are accomplished through a theatrical performance that legitimates and rationalizes organizations, and casts the public in the role of passive spectators. But visibility acts to further conceal rather than illuminate, knowingly eclipsing 'one kind of reality' (Strathern, 2000, p. 309). This may nowhere be more visible than in the corporate 'politics of

visibility' whereby corporations determine what they render transparent and what not (Zyglidopoulos & Fleming, 2011). This leads to several paradoxes: The more organizations report, the less they may do in terms of substance (Boiral, 2012). Corporate disclosures hide more than they show (Gumb, 2007). Before its fall, the US utility company Enron excelled in producing "spectacle theatrics' of financial reports and other representations of economic reality' (Boje et al., 2004, p. 751) that sustained the mass illusion of being one of Fortune's 'Most Admired Companies' with an overvalued stock price, while reaping economic rents and corporate welfare from the state.

Accounting spectacles that offer 'assurance mechanisms' but 'cover the very absence of such a reality' are ubiquitous (Boiral, 2013, p. 1043). Studying sustainability reporting by energy and mining companies, Boiral (2013, p. 1038) concludes that reports depict a highly idealized, artificial and narcissistic image of firms' sustainability efforts that are 'disconnected from the real impacts of business activity'. 'Image-spectacles' of unspoilt nature and threatened species camouflage genuine problems, and portray the firms that threaten ecosystems and wildlife as their guardians. This spectacle of corporate-defined environmentalism may sustain the economic development of Western corporate elites rather than the sustainable development of poor populations across the globe (Banerjee, 2003). Uddin and colleagues (2011) examine how local councils in Uganda had to produce the spectacle of pseudo-participatory accounting techniques in the absence of real participation to please Western donors and demonstrate 'good governance'. In sum, organizations' hyper-transparency and openness promises to make them more visible to their stakeholders and the general public, while they may achieve just the opposite: pacify spectators and keep critical scrutiny at bay.

What implications does Debord offer for organization studies? First, Debord draws attention to the organizational production of spectacles that hide and conceal what may be a much uglier and less glamorous material reality. Organizations produce spectacles to manipulate, curate, and selectively bring into vision what they want to show (the human face of markets in the NYSE opening ritual) while obscuring and rendering inaccessible other things (the circuits of capital driven by the faceless algorithms of high-frequency trading in the data centre).

When value is placed on 'image rather than substance' (Boiral, 2012, p. 650; 2013), it is no wonder that companies work so hard to maintain their front-stage appearance, often through tactical truth-telling, while seeking to conceal a less glamorous and often dirtier back-stage economy. No other scandal than the 2001 collapse of the corporate 'mega-spectacle' of Enron illustrates better how a theatrically enacted facade of corporate celebrity was constructed in the media that 'seduced spectators into a willing suspension of disbelief', while actually running a largely fictitious and rotten enterprise (Boje et al., 2004). When the spectacle bubble busted, the corrosive material conditions got exposed. What was left was an empty shell of accounts. Yet, despite these temporary eruptions into scandalous mega-spectacles, organizations get 'back to the business of business: to produce and disseminate spectacles of illusion' to restore faith in free-market global capitalism (Boje et al., 2004, p. 769). Organizations continue to provide a sense of pseudo-assurance and pseudo-transparency through disclosure and reporting while shifting attention away from failure and irresponsibility in order to protect the organization from culpability or blame (Desai, 2011), so that stakeholders simply 'forget' irresponsible behaviour (Mena, Rintamäki, Fleming, & Spicer, 2016).

Ultimately, the 'politics of visibility' provides a romantic 'velvet curtain' that screens from view the operation of power and masks ongoing exclusion, oppression and exploitation (Khan,

Munir & Willmott, 2007; Zyglidopoulos & Fleming, 2011). Resulting opaqueness in global value chains allows global corporations to pledge ‘plausible deniability’ of human rights violations, such as dispossession of indigenous communities under ‘necrocapitalism’ (Banerjee, 2008). Consider sweatshop production. Even though companies proclaim to audit their value chains against code of conducts, the tragic 2013 collapse of the Rana Plaza factory complex highlights how this conceals problems rather than brings them to light (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2015): Two factories in Rana Plaza had been audited against the Business Social Compliance Initiative shortly before the collapse. It is only when spectacles break down that the back-stage of the much uglier material reality stares into our face.

A second intriguing area for further investigation is the role of spectators as co-producers of spectacles. It is striking how spectacular production has become distributed and dispersed in ways that seem creative, participatory and empowering. This apparent escape from the grip of any single organizing power suggests that the spectacle has not only become ‘integrated’ but also ‘interactive.’ While for Debord (1998, §27) spectacles were ‘images chosen and constructed by *someone else*’, the ‘interactive’ spectacle involves the pseudo-participation of the formerly passive spectator in the show (Best & Kellner, 2001). This complex dynamic of ‘inter-spectacle production, distribution, and consumption’ (Boje, 2001) can rarely be attributed to an individual actor or source of origin, but it is co-created and remixed in increasingly dispersed and fluid ways.

Mass media was only the ‘most stultifying superficial manifestation’ of the spectacle (Debord, 1992/1967, §24). Today, a whole industry of organizations has emerged that run on the spectacle and feed into people and organizations’ desire to render themselves spectacular, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. The explosion of mediatized selfie culture seems to indicate that people embrace spectacular self-production in an attempt to render their

mundane, ordinary life into a social media spectacle. But while consumers may no longer be passive recipients of corporate-generated images, they actually become more closely integrated into the unifying logic of capital accumulation. Debord would likely be astounded to see how social media companies monetize their users' friendships, relations, opinions, and emotions by inviting them to create spectacular representations of their (more dull and boring) lives, and package themselves as spectacular web commodities. The labour expended in the self-commodification of one's 'productive' social relations is then rendered ready for capitalist exploitation.

Brand managers excel at capitalizing on consumers' creativity and emotions while leading them to believe they participate and have agency, thereby reaping the surplus from the immaterial labour of consumers as co-producers of brand value and image (Arvidsson, 2005). For instance, consumers who co-produce content and advertising, such as by endorsing and recommending products, generate an experience, trust, shared emotion and sense of community that make brands unique and valuable. Debord's argument that the spectacle provides the mechanism that sustains society's own subjection and hence alienation remains relevant, all the more as people contribute to the production, display and circulation of spectacles.

Finally, Debord's theory of the spectacle holds implications for how resistance can be organized but also countered and co-opted (Gabriel, 2008). As long as spectacles hide and conceal reality, there is the possibility to reveal and unmask the spectacle. One way to resist the domination of the spectacle is to expose the brute reality that it hides. Activist groups deliberately work to break down spectacles and to disclose another, uglier reality behind brand name products. 'Labour behind the Label', the UK's branch of the CleanClothesCampaign, or the original idea behind the Fairtrade label (Reinecke, 2010) do exactly that: Bring back into sight the material conditions of production behind the fabricated façade. There is the brand, but there is also the

sweatshop. There is cloud computing, but ultimately the seemingly immaterial 'cloud' is powered by entire landscapes of computer servers whose carbon footprint equals that of the aviation industry (Cook & Van Horn).

Unsurprisingly, corporations invent ever more sophisticated spectacle forms to counter such exposures. In his *Comments*, Debord (1988) observed how global capitalism produced 'integrated spectacles', which combine commodity fetishism and pseudo-contesting. This integration of two previous spectacular forms – the 'concentrated spectacle' in planned societies based on overt forms of power, control and propaganda and the bourgeois-democratic 'diffused spectacle' based on seduction through the 'abundance of commodities' (Debord, 1992/1967, §64) – would make resistance to corporate hegemony 'seemingly futile' (Boje et al., 2004, p. 755). Consider how organizations accommodate activists' demands strategically in ways that co-opt civil society (Levy, Reinecke & Manning, 2016). What is presented as democratic participation in public consultations or multi-stakeholder initiatives is often carefully orchestrated by elite lobbyists and public affairs professionals, who offer grassroots 'activism services' on behalf of their paying clients to create pseudo-participation (Kraemer, Whiteman & Banerjee, 2013; Walker, 2014).

To avoid such co-optation, one has to fight spectacle with spectacle. Debord's concept of the 'situation' and 'detournement' techniques suggest such an alternative that constructs confrontation between two spectacle forms, a dominant and a resistant one. The creation of a counter-spectacle confronts dominant spectacle illusion through parody, irony and paradox. In carnivalesque protest the spectacular gets 'itself absorbed and dissolved' in paradoxical ways: Carnival, such the Mardi Gras, both performs symbolic order through ritual while parodying and mocking the colonizing ideology (Islam et al., 2008, p. 1583). Street parades and carnival-like street theatre, as well as e-carnivals or 'hacktivism' are attempts at creating emancipatory

situations that open up the possibility of self-reflective questioning, critical consciousness, and spectacle script revision (Boje et al., 2004, p. 766).

The Spectacle as Hyper-reality

While Debord still hangs on to an 'old-fashioned' concept of reality, the view of the spectacle can be taken further into an even more provocative direction: Maybe there is no outside reality that the spectacle disguises; and the search for a backstage reality will circle around an endless series of front stages? Maybe spectacle is all there is? This postmodernist position finds expression in the work of Jean Baudrillard, who was intimately aware of Debord's work even if their writings were not positioned in direct dialogue. Yet, it proposes a more radical ontology that takes Debord's analysis, rooted in Marxist materialism, one step further. Baudrillard (1993/1976) declares the death of reality by arguing that the distinction between the real and its imaginary, between sign and signified becomes effaced in the contemporary era. 'The real is not only that which can be reproduced, but *that which is always already reproduced*: the hyperreal' (Baudrillard (1993/1976, p. 73). Society has become organized by 'models of a real without origin or reality,' (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 166), thus the 'hyperreal is beyond representation.' As the distinction between reality and model becomes eroded, reality is perpetually unknowable and is reinvented as fiction. We only have access to illusion and simulacra which we come to routinely accept as reality.

Reality television is probably the archetype of a hyper-reality that, on one level, presents to viewers a scripted, staged and edited performance as reality, while, on another level, of course it is based on 'real' footage (Gilman-Opalsky, 2011). Real and unreal are thus folded into one another and become indistinguishable. When trying to perforate the surface level, there is ultimately nothing to get at but endless circulation, impressions and images. Or in Nietzsche's

words, behind the mask is just another mask. Yet, the intriguing aspect of hyper-reality is that spectators do not inadvertently mistake fiction for reality, but that they are fully aware of the fabricated nature of spectacles, yet seem not to care.

In this view, the spectacle thus does not obscure or manipulate social relations, but has become fully self-referential, universal and totalitarian as *simulacrum*. 'We live in a *referendum* mode precisely because there is no longer any *referential*' (Baudrillard, 1993/1976, p. 62, emphasis original). This is illustrated by the simulacrum of the opinion poll, which manages this 'remarkable trick – it can present us with public opinion in the absence of an actually existing public!' (Gilman-Opalsky, 2011, p. 47; Baudrillard, 1993/1976). Public opinion is both the medium and the message, without recourse to a stable reference point: The public has no existence outside the poll. Baudrillard suggests that:

'The masses are no longer a referent because they no longer belong to the order of representation. They don't express themselves, they are surveyed. They don't reflect upon themselves, they are tested.' (Baudrillard, 2007/1978, p. 19-20.)

In 1991, Baudrillard made the deliberately provocative claim that the Gulf War 'did not take place.' What he was trying to say is that our access to events and reality is always already heavily mediated, in this case a heavily televised war. While the video footage was real, what was presented to audiences were strategically constructed narratives based on crafted storylines and the selective usage of materials from a vast unusable surplus of recorded images, similar to the production of reality television. This is expressed when Baudrillard (1998, p. 133) suggests that 'reality itself is abolished, obliterated, in favor of this neo-reality of the model which is given material force by the medium itself.'

Baudrillard's more radical position on the spectacle resonates with scholars who have examined how organizational practices become fully self-referential. Grandy and Mills (2004)

argue that much of corporate strategy is a model of the entangled orders of simulation that often bear no resemblance to reality, thus are hyper-real. Their power lies in representing fictitious realities *as if* they were real, even though most people know they are not. Strategic management, 'exists to make us believe that there are 'problems' to be solved in the 'real' world, that there is in fact a 'real' world in which 'problems' exist' (Grandy & Mills, 2004, p. 1165). For instance, mission statements exist as a relatively unquestioned truth, even though it may not be clear whether and why they represent the organization. Aiding to this, the new profession of the corporate storyteller specializes in exploiting this blurring relationship between fact and fiction by helping corporate leaders to invent their own hyper-realities. Critiquing corporate storytellers, The Financial Times (2014) argued, 'to make a business narrative stick, leaders have to repeat it, reinforcing the story for themselves' until they ultimately end up believing it. At some point it is not longer clear whether fictional stories were invented or not.

Boorstin's (1961) concept of the 'pseudo-event' illustrates how organizations can invent newsworthy realities in the form of 'event-spectacles,' such as press conferences, award ceremonies, or speeches. These pseudo-events are planned, planted, or incited for the immediate purpose of creating (rather than reporting) news that were not there before, and have no referential outside the spectacle. But it does no longer matter whether they are 'real' or fake.

The fact that spectators seem to embrace fabricated reality without pretence to an original opens up unprecedented opportunities for spectacular production. Copies of an original are not only endlessly reproducible, but these copies are sent into circulation without the need to be actually copying an original. This ultimate commodity dream is realized in form of the Japanese pop star hologram, Hatsune Miku. Rather than having to carefully assemble a boy or girl band, the humanoid projection provides the music industry with a pop star whose career and image is fully

controllable and whose performance provides an endlessly reproducible product. Hatsune Miku packs stadiums, poses for fashion shoots, and changes costumes with a single hard-drive swap. Not only products, even virtual leaders may thus be fabricated with no direct relation to an actual person, as the appointment of clown icon Ronald McDonald as 'Chief Happiness Officer' of the McDonald Corporation illustrates (Boje & Rhodes, 2005). As forms of simulacra, such creative and fabricated imitations seem more real than real.

Most people look rather sceptically at all sorts of images, including the promises of commercials, reality TV, and heavily filtered selfies. They are well aware of the divide between image and reality and accept that much of what they see is a carefully curated display. Like spectators of reality TV, they know that much of the world around them is set up, fabricated, scripted and simulated, yet seem to embrace it. Social media users often create fake accounts or multiple accounts, each targeted to a particular audience, to portray, test or play with different actual or potential identities. Some people identify even more with their fabricated social media selves than their offline selves. Instead of Baudrillard's Representation (with capital R), it seems more accurate to speak about representations – the fragmentation of spectacular reality.

The notion of hyper-reality is useful for understanding organizational participation in 'post-truth' politics – a reliance on assertions that 'feel true' but have no basis in facts. While postmodernists have sought to deconstruct notions of truth or fact in the hope of liberalization from authority, the actualization of a 'post-factual' world seems far less desirable. One just has to look to how the media turned Donald Trump's 2016 US presidential campaign into a spectacle, feeding their own desire for a show (The Economist, 2016). It did not matter that Trumps' provocative statements bore little, if any relation to reality but that they were newsworthy. His fantastical claim that US President Obama was a Muslim born outside the US resonated with many

Americans, while simultaneously knowing that this was not true. The belief that it could be true, even if knowingly it is not, is enough to hold and justify an opinion. This instance of 'post-truth' politics illustrates how truth is intentionally falsified and people knowingly choose to accept illusion as reality.

Once critical theorists have unmasked and deconstructed everything, the images become so shallow that there is hardly any unmasking to do, what is left is an at times triumphant, at times disillusioned cynicism. In contrast to Debord, who saw theory as indispensable substance of revolutionary praxis, Baudrillard's radicalness consists in a refutation of the possibility of radical politics (Gilman-Opalsky, 2011). It is futile to counterpose human life against spectacular capitalism, or believe that a revolutionary philosophy of praxis can change the conditions of post-industrial capitalist society. People seem to care less and less about the distinction between 'real' and representation, so that the exposure of spectacles is not even news anymore.

For organizations, this means they can exploit people's complicity in non-truths without even having to try too hard to pretend. It matters less when realities are glaringly different from corporate claims when no one really expected them to hold true. Employees may be perfectly aware that mission statements, proclaimed values and slogans bear little relation to their working lives. But through working at a 'cynical distance' (Fleming & Spicer, 2003), they perform such organizational prescriptions nevertheless, sometimes even better than if they identified with them. This is comically reworked in Lars van Trier's film 'The boss of it all.' An absent, omnipotent but ultimately fictitious leader serves as the organizational simulacrum bearing the blame for unpopular decisions while employees just play along, knowing all along that no such boss exists (Costas, 2009). A similar idea is conveyed in Costas and Grey's (2016) discussion of the public secret, such as pseudo-confidential gossip which most, if not all organizational members know and

talk about. Spectators may happily turn a blind eye to such pseudo-concealed information and participate in the conspiracy of silence even if they are aware of what is going on.

Such working with 'eyes wide shut' has serious consequences for organizational life, where all too often doubt is suppressed and conformity rewarded. Spectacle-induced cynicism can then intensify what Alvesson and Spicer (2012) term *functional stupidity*. Skilled and knowledgeable employees routinely refrain from using their intellectual capacities such as reflexivity, critical thinking or substantive reasoning as a necessary strategy to support 'normal' organizational functioning. Instead, they buy into, even if cynically so, into managerially engineered spectacles and fantasies. In Jenkins and Delbridge (forthcoming) study on a virtual reception business, lying and 'strategic deception' is not only normalized as an intrinsic feature of work, but also materially rewarded. Such organizational contexts have serious consequences not least for organizational ethics, as they obstruct the exercise of ethical judgment and scrutiny, let alone whistle blowing. In sum, in Baudrillard's postmodern version, the spectacle is constitutive of hyper-reality that plays into the interests of powerful organizational actors in ever more insidious ways.

The Spectacle as Performativity

Finally, what if the organizational production of spectacles actually creates a new reality? What if spectacles do not just hide reality, or eradicate the distinction between appearance and reality altogether, but bring into being what is otherwise absent, aiding in the creation of new understandings, relations and realities? Such a view departing from Debord and Baudrillard would propel us into territories where spectacles shape identities, relations and social processes with extensive and possibly unintended consequences.

One way to think about the ability of the spectacle to ‘produce a different world’ (Loxley, 2007, p. 2) is the notion of performativity. Building on Austin’s (1962) foundational work on ‘performative utterances’, or what he described as speech acts that do not simply convey a fact or a lie, but ‘do something’. The classic example is the utterance ‘I declare you husband and wife.’ It does not simply convey information about two people, but will actually make them married. The very act of saying or representing something reshapes or *performs* the object being talked about (MacKenzie, 2006; Roberts, 2009). Performativity theories have been advanced through Butler’s (1993) work on the constitutive role of discourses in the making of subjects and social norms – as she reminds us that discourses are not simply uttered by subjects, but conditions for their very existence. Performativity theories start from a view of ‘the social’ or ‘the organization’ as assembled and fluid configurations of human, material and ideational components. Related to actor-network theory, science and technology studies and other socio-material approaches (Callon, 2007; Gond, Cabantous, Harding, & Learmonth, 2016), performativity suggests that we need to think of all kinds of representation as intricate and inseparable processes of meaning making involving subjects, objects, artefacts and material forces.

Paying attention to performativity dynamics is useful to extend our understanding of the relationship between spectacle and organization. From a performativity perspective, spectacles do not distract and mask a real state of affairs, or supersede reality altogether. Instead, spectacles do things, and reality comes into being through attempts to represent it (MacKenzie, 2006). Understood in this manner, spectacles continuously perform realities in subtle, but important ways, and shape what we see, know and are able to act on.

Consider how power is performed through spectacles of power. Representational mechanisms of power do not just represent, but perform and constitute power. The doctrine of

transubstantiation, so central to the Catholic Church, performs the priest's power to make the Divine present, even if momentarily. When Catholics celebrate the Eucharist, the sacrament creates 'real presence,' not just representation, of the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ while retaining the appearance of bread and wine. Scholars have also studied how the power of the Sun King Louis XIV in 17th century France was performed through 'portraying' his power, including aristocratic imagery, extreme extravagance and royal sway (Marin, 1993). Cowart (2008) offers a nuanced account of the performative effects of the Sun King's spectacle by describing it as 'textured dialogue consisting of a heterogeneity of discourses, rather than the reflection of a monochromatic, absolutist culture'. The representations of the king facilitated his presence and power, but also generated new public spheres and models of society. That is, the spectacle produced the kinds of 'new worlds' that performativity theories are concerned with.

In a similar way, the reliance on techniques of auditing and reporting gives rise to new forms of 'governance at a distance' and provides the foundations of extensive, historical transformations, such as New Public Management (Power, 1997). Studying the emergence of accounting reforms, Uddin, Gump & Kasumba (2011) explicitly connect their metaphorical and transformational workings to an extended conceptualization of the spectacle (Debord, 1988; Best & Kellner, 2001). While accounting spectacles pacify and create an illusion of participation and transparency, they also generate new practices, regimes and contestations, such as those arising from the global spread of Western accounting principles. Studying the performativity of disclosure and transparency spectacles may help us grasp how new power relations, realities and forms of governance (Flyverbom, Leonardi, Stohl, & Stohl, 2016) result from such practices.

Financial markets are a prime example of performativity. They are built of spectacles that come true when people believe in their own constructions and models (MacKenzie, 2006). A

perfect example are virtual currencies or crypto-currencies, such as the bitcoin. Money, which Marx termed 'the ultimate commodity,' used to 'simply' represent, that is, stand in place of a fixed quantity of gold held in central government reserves. But as nations abandoned the gold standard, paper money came to stand for paper money itself. What is a twenty pounds note other than a twenty pounds note, with an image of the Queen and her claim that: 'I promise to pay the bearer on demand the sum of twenty pounds'? The emergent circulation of bitcoins since 2009 takes this one step further where 'its design is public, nobody owns or controls Bitcoin and everyone can take part' (Bitcoin, 2016). Crypto-currencies 'reduce the degree of materiality of the financial reality' (Schinckus, 2008, p. 12). They abandon not only the referent of precious metal but the very pretence to such a referent, celebrating currency as the representation of circulating nothing, but a nothing that has widespread, performative effects in the world. For instance, speculative bubbles have no real finality but a reflexive logic: On the one hand, they are based on a hyper-real simulation of the financial reality; yet on the other, they profoundly shape the 'real' economy (Schinckus, 2008).

Extending ideas from Austin, Butler, and MacKenzie (see Gond et al., 2016), organization scholars have examined how organizations talk, model or 'represent' emergent realities into existence. This has shown how performative representations, speech and other communicative acts, play a central role in the ongoing (re-)production of organizational realities (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Thyssen, 2005). One example is how new 'boundaryless' organizational forms, such as the internet-based, hacktivist collective Anonymous, accomplish 'organizationality' through the performance of identity claims online (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015). Anonymous illustrates how an organization performs itself as an organization by virtue of creating the representation it

comes to be: Anonymous creates itself 'as an organizational endeavor...through carefully crafted and staged speech acts' (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015, p. 23).

Understanding spectacles as productive forces that shape reality through the process of trying to represent it has implications for theorizations and future research in our field.

First, and in terms of the theory of the spectacle as a political project, a performativity perspective offers a more optimistic outlook that may allow actors to throw spanners into the works of corporate spectacle production. Counter-spectacle production may be employed to perform alternative realities – whether in the shape of alternative representations or ways of living and being. For instance, corporate social responsibility (CSR) spectacles may sometimes serve as the transformational mechanism through which corporations may come to resemble the image they are portraying. 'Aspirational talk may play a significant role in moving organizations forward towards higher standards and practices' (Christensen, Morsing & Thyssen, 2013, p. 374), and turn the discrepancy between aspiring representations and apathetic realities into productive forces. Thus, 'talk about such ambitions provides articulations of ideals, beliefs, values and frameworks for decisions—in other words, raw material for (re)constructing the organization' (Christensen et al., 2013, p. 376). Even if CSR practices may not initially live up to their 'talk', organizations that conjure up the spectacle of CSR for ceremonious reasons may ultimately come to talk themselves into enacting the new reality they are trying to portray (Haack, Schoeneborn & Wickert, 2012). CSR spectacles and 'cheap talk' may sometimes work as a Trojan horse that produces a 'creeping commitment' and other organizational transformations (Haack et al., 2012).

Second, organization scholars interested in the consequences of digital transformations can study how the emergence of new spectacle forms shapes organizational life. Online platforms

such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram do not just depict social relationships, but reconfigure them and produce new status hierarchies that did not exist before. Counting Twitter followers or Facebook friends or calculating somebody's 'Klout score' produce new types of social value, status and esteem. By measuring online impact across social networks, a user's Klout score not just reveals his/her online value, but brings it into existence. Those crowned as 'top influencers' – with ability 'to drive action' – can lucratively engage with advertisers, branding agencies, and PR consultants seeking to infiltrate and capitalize on the communication networks of hyper-connected individuals.

Another digital transformation is the emergence of 'big data' visualizations. They provide aesthetically pleasing and captivating visual mappings of phenomena such as human movements, financial transactions or global networks. As a new form of knowledge production and representation, beyond narratives or numbers, these present alluring spectacles – the promise that we can finally see things as they really are and in 'real time'. Big data gives new shape and fuel to 'the fantasy of command and control through seeing' (Gregg, 2015, p. 37). But data spectacles also have performative effects. They produce new organizational and social realities by guiding our attention and reconfiguring visibility of the social issues, problems or opportunities. Urban spaces, terrorist activities or development issues all look different if seen through the prism of big data visualizations. Focusing on the performativity of digital spectacles highlights their power to reconfigure, sometimes in unexpected ways, the phenomena they promise to depict.

Finally, a performativity perspective highlights that the realities that spectacles produce are hardly consistent, uniform or coherent. Performativity can also produce quite surprising and unintended effects. As representations work back on the thing that is to be revealed, they tend to produce 'unintended effects such that the making visible starts to change that which is rendered

transparent' (Roberts, 2009, p. 958). Spectacles draw on and reinforce different and possibly conflicting worldviews, thereby shaping social, economic and cultural dynamics in multiple directions (Markovitz, 2011). Rather than the loss of an authoritative referent, there is a proliferation and co-existence of multiple referents, all of which generate organizational and individual realities. Spectacle production takes unexpected forms and shapes that no one single actor can foresee or orchestrate. For instance, the proliferation of digital platforms and other technological environments means that organizational displays multiply and fragment, and that long-standing concerns about information control and consistency between the organization and its appearance are challenged. In many ways, what we get is not ONE image of the organization, but a lot of different ways of being present, not illusions but attempts to speak different registers, not replacing but creating a multiplicity.

To sum up, understanding the spectacle as performative highlights the need to pay greater attention to how spectacular production can unleash processes, negotiations and multiplicities that ultimately do create new realities. What may at one point be a commodified, empty image or a staged form of hyper-reality can become the source of organizational transformations, that is become performative. Studying these various workings and ramifications of spectacles may help us grasp processes of organizational transformation and social ordering, including how organizational practices such as practices like accountability, transparency and participation, reconfigure and mobilize objects, subjects and ideas in unexpected and paradoxical ways.

Discussion: Spectacular Times and Organizational Spectacles

Why is it worthwhile to return to Debord's work 50 years later? For Debord (1992/1967, p. 221), the aim of theory was provocation, aiding in the 'historical mission of installing truth in the world'.

Inspired by this emancipatory and reflexive-critical aspiration, we seek to stimulate critical scrutiny of the contemporary workings of the spectacle. The concept of the spectacle invites us to focus on the organization of the real and the making of organizations through processes of dramatized representation.

While for Debord, it was the advent of mass media that allowed spectacles to colonize social life, organization is increasingly built on constructions of spectacular realities. As more and more parts of organizational and social life take the shape of images and representations and as the boundary between material realities and depictions blur, the production of spectacles moves to the core of organizational activity. Organizations are increasingly aware of the need to manage their appearance, consider what to show or cloud from vision, and how to curate their presence in ways that render visible certain aspects of the organization but not others – in short, manage their visibilities (Flyverbom et al., 2016). Organizations produce spectacles of themselves through branding, accounting, reporting or theatrical practices that narrate a particular organizational reality into existence (Alvesson, 1990; Boje et al., 2004; Boiral, 2013; Grandy & Mills, 2004). By doing so, they package themselves – both to employees and the outside world – as something they are not (Alvesson, 2013). But spectacles are also produced for sale. Social media companies offer interactive technologies that enable users to render themselves spectacular.

Reviving a critical theory of the spectacle seem particularly pertinent at a moment in time when the ubiquity of digital technologies, complexities of far-flung supply chains and other loose, networked, and ‘boundaryless’ forms of organizing characterized by ‘fluidity’ (Schreyogg & Sydow, 2010) generate new forms, possibilities and circuits of spectacle production and consumption. Our main contribution has been to rework the concept of the spectacle by developing a pluralistic analytical vocabulary that allows organization scholars to interrogate the role of organizations in

mediating the relationship between the physical world and abstractions organized around images, visual artefacts and staged events, in short; the spectacle-organization nexus. We have examined three different ways of thinking about this spectacle-organization nexus, and their relevance to organization studies. Debord's original notion understands the spectacle as commodity fetish. This renders the Spectacle a form of ideological obfuscation, a veneer masking brutal reality by presenting a false, dream-like image of reality so as to lead to people to overlook the causes of their condition. The second, post-modern reading proposed by Baudrillard invites us to understand spectacle as simulacrum, which is corrosive of the notion of reality as such. On the third reading, the spectacle becomes performative of reality as such with the potential of unleashing surprising, paradoxical and unintended dynamics.

While each view carries with it a particular set of ontological and epistemological assumptions, we argue that there is value in allowing for multiple approaches to knowledge to co-exist rather than viewing one as inherently superior over another. To be sure, post-structuralists may feel uncomfortable with Debord's Marxist roots of the spectacle on grounds that it reproduces modernist notions of frontstage and backstage and the assumption that one can actually move 'behind' the spectacle curtain and see the real thing. Yet, Debord's original formulation can furnish us with a specific vocabulary that is attuned to understanding how spectacles are designed to obscure social and political inequalities and contradictions churning beneath spectacular reality claims. The collapse of spectacles, such as the subprime crisis or the Rana Plaza collapse, dramatically reveal glitches in global inter-spectacle networks, and bring to light the material conditions of global political economy.

Baudrillard's extension of the spectacle as simulacrum challenges us to rethink the idea of a stable organizational reality altogether, highlighting the myriad ways in which the spectacle-

simulacrum becomes constitutive of the precarious social order at a given moment. This provides a more cynical, yet potent analytical perspective that explains how the spectacle-simulacrum comes to supplant reality with (hyper-)reality in ways so treacherous that people come to disregard blatant discrepancies between appearance and reality, even embrace illusion and fake claims, as the disquieting rise of post-truth politics illustrates.

Finally, the performative view of the spectacle is useful to understand how spectacles perform actors, spaces, and relationships in ways that may not always be intended or controllable. This propels organizations into new territories and conversations, for instance because representations not just hide material inequalities but are themselves productive of new ones. The view also highlights that spectacles are not only passifying representations, but take the shape of aspirations and promises about the future and thereby become generative forces in the making and remaking of organizational and societal realities.

50 years later, Debord's argument still provides a powerful tool for understanding the role of the spectacles in organization. At a moment in time when organizational processes and global economies are increasingly fluid, deterritorialized and digital, it seems pertinent to attend to the explosion and dynamics of spectacles.

Table 1. Understandings of the Spectacle.

Nature of spectacle	Approach rooted in	Ontology	Relationship between representation and reality	Politics and effects of spectacle
Fetish	Marxism	Material realism	Representation <i>conceals</i> the real	False consciousness. Ideological obfuscation.
Simulacrum	Post-modernism	Anti-realism	Hyper-reality. There is <i>no real</i> beyond representation	Cynicism. Sarcasm. Indifference.
Performativity	STS/Performativity studies	Constructivism	Representation <i>is part of what makes up the real</i>	Multiplicity. Engaged intervention. Critique.

Acknowledgements

We thank our Editor, Robin Holt, and two anonymous reviewers, as well as Johannes Angermüller, Lars Thøger Christensen, Dan Kärreman, Maja Korica, and Glen Whelan and participants at the CBS ICM seminar 2016 for their comments on earlier drafts of the paper.

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